Short-Essay

A Look at Empathy, University Belonging, and Intersectionality: How to Support a Diverse Student Body Amid the COVID-19 Crisis

Shantalea Johns
Stephanie Hawkes
Wayne State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The present short essay discusses the impact COVID-19 has had on college students. As universities work to build supportive learning environments during these unprecedented times, it is important for practitioners to consider how mental health and student identity impact student success. The framework proposes that empathy, university belonging, and an intersectional approach to academic support can contribute to a student's mental health, identity, and emotional well-being as they transition back to academic life.

Keywords: COVID 19, student success, sense of belonging, diversity, global crisis

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students across the country moved to online learning environments while caring for themselves and their families. Few studies have explored the potential impact the pandemic has had on student's mental and emotional wellbeing, specifically the onset of chronic stress, PTSD, depression, somatization, and other forms of mental illness that may be linked to COVID-19 experiences (Lederman, 2020 & Horne, 2020). The

conditions mentioned above may be further exacerbated for students who are more vulnerable to inequalities in higher education. These inequalities could include previous difficulties in academic and social integration at a university or gaps in relevant interventions required to care for their physical or mental health. This article examines the relative impact of empathy, university belonging, and an intersectional approach to academic support on students' transition from COVID-19 stress to academic success.

TRAUMA AND COVID-19

Studies conducted before COVID-19 found that traumatic events may show severe impairment to comprehend lessons, maintain attention during class instruction, meet deadlines, or suppress impulse-control appropriately (Cole, 2013; Carrion et al., 2013). More recently, the Active Minds (2020) student survey found that eight in 10 of students reported having a difficult time focusing on their studies and avoiding distractions, and 74% found it challenging to maintain a routine due to COVID-19. The significant challenge for educators working with highly stressed or traumatized college students then comes down to finding ways to help students move from COVID-19 stress to feeling safe enough to learn.

Understanding Intersectionality

One best practice on how to support students is an understanding of students as a whole person and the implications of their intersecting identities. Crenshaw (1991) first coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how power operates to create systems where black women are oppressed based on their gender and race. Since its emergence, intersectionality has been used to describe oppression more broadly across a wide array of identities. In her words, "intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It is not merely that there is a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things." The understanding and application of intersectionality are critical as we work to support students through this crisis, as they all carry intersecting identities that may marginalize and exclude them from their educational pursuits.

The Practice of Empathy

Researchers define empathy as a form of social communication that recognizes and responds to another person's thoughts or feelings with an appropriate emotion (Hybels & Weaver, 2009). When students with trauma histories come to college, it is essential to connect with them through empathy and to work to understand their unique identities, backgrounds, and experiences as they grapple with the stressors of COVID-19. In university settings, practicing empathy means (a) using the student's preferred name, (b) encouraging students to express themselves (c) being fully present (d) giving genuine recognition and praise (e) show students care and have a natural curiosity about their lives (f) not interrupting or rushing to give advice (g) observing non-verbal communication.

University Belonging

A first step in creating university belonging is to have a proactive communication plan for students that will engage them within the institution in meaningful ways and to build trust and resilience in times of uncertainty (Wilson & Gore, 2013). Maslow (1954) identified belonging as a basic human need. Students, especially those from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds, want to feel respected and valued at their institution. This means that creating a sense of belonging for students helps them to feel valued at the university. Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and essential to campus community or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (p. 3). One method for identifying and supporting students belonging is to connect them early on to people whom they will have frequent interaction with like faculty members, mentors, and academic advisors (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). Staff and administrators from diversity, equity, and inclusion centers are experts in understanding underrepresented and marginalized students and are excellent partners for providing resources and support as well.

CONCLUSION

Our students bring their hidden stories to us. It is our goal to translate what we know about university belonging, empathy, and intersectionality into student support services as we navigate through the COVID-19 crisis.

REFERENCES

Active Minds (2020). "The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Mental Health."
	COVID-19 Student Survey.
Chessman, H., Morgan T, (2019). "College Student Mental Health and Well-Being:
	A Survey of Presidents."
Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and
	Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-
	1299.
Horne, L. (2020) "Supporting a Healthy Campus Community During COVID-19."
	Active Minds Blog. April 20, 2020.
	https://www.activeminds.org/blog/supporting-a-healthy-campus-
	community-during-covid-19/
Hybels, S. & Weaver, R. (2009). Communicating effectively. New York. NY:
	McGraw-Hill.
Lederman, Doug. (2020). "Presidents Fear Financial, and Human, Toll of
	Coronavirus." Inside Higher Ed, March 27, 2020.
	https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/college-presidents-fear-
	financial-and-human-toll-coronavirustheir-campuses.
Maslow, A. H., Frager, R., Fadiman, J., McReynolds, C., & Cox, R. (1987).
	Motivation and personality (3rd). *New York*.
Strayhorn, T. (2012). College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational
	success for all. New York, NY: Routledge.
Schreiner, L. A., Noel, P., Anderson, E., & Cantwell, L. (2011). The impact of
	faculty and staff on high-risk college student persistence. *Journal of
	College Student Development*, 52(3), 321–338
Wilson, S., & Gore, J. (2013). An attachment model of university connectedness.
	Journal of Experimental Education, 81(2), 178–198.

FIRST AND LAST NAME, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her major research interests lie in the area of academic literacies, academic integrity, higher education research and multiculturalism. Email: kmanjet@gmail.com

FIRST AND LAST NAME, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Languages, Literacies and Translation, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her major research interests lie in the area of academic literacies, academic integrity, higher education research and multiculturalism. Email: kmanjet@gmail.com